



GHILLHI
TRACH

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&

Juneau burned.

Sam didn't know where she was, what was going on, and she sure as eff didn't know how she was going to get out of it. Migou death machines were everywhere. Locusts crawled through the ruin that used to be the arcology. Remiel tensed all around her. They both wanted to get out of this alive.

The Migou weren't taking out power centers and waiting to round everyone up like they usually did. They were calculatedly and efficiently exterminating every living thing. Sam knew she was dead if she didn't keep moving. Remiel snaked tentacles out of his forearm – Sam tagged a couple Migou battletroops that were a little too close.

Whipping around the corner, she dove for cover in a ruined building and hoped they weren't interested in

her. The tentacles slithered back under her Engel's armor plating. Sam screamed into her comm, "Blackjack! Ruin! Anybody! Can you hear me?!"

All that came through the static were incoherent shouts and muffled screams.

"Oh god... is anybody there?!"

A battle spilled out onto the street behind her. Sam heard the sounds of panicked civilians. A Broadsword backpedaled futilely as a couple Locusts tore chunks out of it with their gigantic metal mandibles. She stared in disbelief. "Oh no..."

The Malach kicked up and leaped high into the air, raining down balls of superheated plasma onto the Migou. Sam knew she got one of them, but proximity warning claxons ripped her attention away. Down

through the smoke above her tore a Wasp, stinger down, deadly rocket pods zeroing in on her.

Sam couldn't help but scream. She dove to the ground and rolled away in desperation, hoping that she could use some of the cover to survive. The Wasp let loose its payload and rockets flew everywhere. Everything around Sam exploded. She screamed so hard she sprayed blood onto the inside of her helmet...

...from dreamland, Lieutenant Samantha Masters bolted upright in bed, screaming like she screamed when she thought she was dead in Juneau. Her short platinum 'do was matted to her head like hair product gone bad and sweat soaked her black tank top. Disoriented, but coming back to reality, Sam looked around with fading panic. Klaxons droned and someone banged on her door.

"Masters! Masters! What's wrong?" It sounded like Timana. Sam wiped the sweat off her face and shook herself. "Nothing."

"Then get moving. We're up."

"I'll be right there." Sam rocketed out of bed, grabbing her flightsuit and ripping off her sweat-soaked underwear. The nightmare was gone already and she looked like she usually did – cold and determined. But you if really looked, you could see that Sam wasn't quite home.



In the cold light of dawn, four mecha stalked through the coastal forest on Bainbridge Island – Sam's Engel, CC's Broadsword, Jack's Scimitar, and Cevy's Storm. Winter rain poured down around them, smothering them with white noise. The CO felt the need to check in. "Keep it tight. Any sign?"

"This is Bloodlock. Negative." Until Sam met Cevy, she didn't know Nazzadi could have southern drawls.

"Crater. Negative." The charge beams on Jack's Scimitar pulsed with energy.

Sam stared intently and out CC's voice. "Misery?"

She was almost sure she could... no, that's not it... wait... there was something. The Malach pointed. "There."

A phantom shape flew neatly through the trees. Landing, it shimmered as the Rapiers' stealth system powered down. Sam hated the way stealth mecha just seem to step out of thin air.

CC stepped up. "You Torment?"

"You Feint?"

"That's me," replied CC.

Timana dropped the stealth on his Eclipse. He stood an arm's length behind the Rapiers, with those acid-dripping claws waiting for trouble. "Are you our man?" the Eclipse "whispered" into the mech's ear "Uh... yeah."

"Good." The Eclipse snapped its claws back in. "What do you have for us?"

"I'm transmitting," said Torment. "Dragonfly. Just sitting there. Discovered it entirely by accident."

The squad crept closer to the coastline to get a better look. Information rocketed across the inside of her helmet. Sam briefly remembered what it was like to sit in a mech's pilot chair, but she preferred the warm fluid of the Engel's control capsule. Her HUD showed that Torment had outlined a red square for them, but Sam still couldn't see it. "This rain isn't helping."

"Scalpel, you flush it out," ordered CC. Timana disappeared again. "Crater, Misery, you get ready to pound it."

Sam took firing position, aiming on coordinates at something that didn't look like it was there. Jack followed suit. She asked, "Can you see it?"

"Oh sure. Plain as day." Jack could always find time for sarcasm. It was a like a hobby to him.

Meanwhile, Timana slid into the water with barely a ripple. The Dragonfly continued doing whatever it was doing. It could see him if it knew where to look – unfortunately for it, the Migou didn't. Timana burst up from underneath and took a chunk out of it with his claws. The thing rippled and was suddenly there for all the world to see. The Nazzadi quickly leaped out of the way. "Now!"

Critical surges of energy crackled in Jack's charge cannons. "Hello pretty."

Both Sam and Jack let it fly. The overcharged energy balls exploded across its side followed by a swarm of rockets. It's hard to tell which did which, but the Dragonfly flew apart into mess of angry pieces.

Jack howled. "We'd like to welcome you to Seattle!" He decided to punctuate by firing again, blowing the remains even more sky-high. As the ashes settled, Cevy drawled over the comm, "You're an animal! Too bad Misery Sunshine here wasn't much help."

"Bloodlock, get down there and help Scalpel," directed CC.

"Yes, ma'am." Cevy took off like a shot, showing off again.

"Stay sharp, people. Keep an eye out for friends." CC turned to Sam. "Don't mind her, Misery."

"I don't." Sam's Malach bristled around her and a low growl rumbled in its ribcage. Jack slowly turned. "What was that?"

"Remiel," replied Sam.

"What?"

She reached out and stroked the uterine-like wall around her. "My Engel. I think he's anxious."

"Great... why's he anxious?"

"I think he's upset there wasn't more to kill."

The radio went silent for a full thirty seconds. Finally Jack said, "Okay... I'm going down to the beach."

As Jack walked his Scimitar through the forest, Timana slipped into view and approached. "Captain, there's not much left of this one and we're not seeing any more."

"Good." CC switched channels to radio home. "Command, this is Feint. We have neutralized the Migou threat. Repeat, we have neutralized the Migou threat."



Sam walked into the debriefing room. Jack and Cevy sat in a cold pool of light and looked like they were trying hard not to look like they were just talking about her. The beautiful tattooed Nazzadi went back to checking out something on a palm-top and Juarez threw on his best rugged look and tried to look like he wasn't trying to look down the front of Cevy's partially unzipped flightsuit. Sam ignored them and took a seat at the window. You'd never know they were in a building within a building. The arcology street below her was lit up like a perfect morning while a simulated wind blew through the trees.

Jack tried to clear his throat, but all it did was make the uncomfortable silence all the more obvious. Fortunately, CC and Timana walked in, followed by Captain Robins. Sam noted that CC had this gift – she always looked like a badass. She was an interesting contrast to the perfectly-toned stoic Timana and Robins, who looked like every middle-aged career officer in every movie. Robins locked the door behind him.

"Everybody have a seat." Robins headed to the front of the room while the squad situated itself. "I've read your report, but there are a few things I want to clear up. Lt. Timana, how were you able to see the Dragonfly?"

"I didn't. I just had faith in intel."

Robins smiled. "That's good to know, soldier."

"Ass-kisser," whispered Cevy.

CC busted her. "Something to add, Lt. Cevy?"

"No, ma'am."

"And Lt. Juarez," Robins continued. "Was there anything left of the Dragonfly before you pulverized it with a third shot?" Jack smirked just a little. "No, sir."

Robins frowned. "Let's try and show a little restraint in the future."

"Yes, sir."

"So, if there's nothing else..." Robins got up.

"Sir," said Sam. "What was bug recon doing down here?"

"I'm sorry, Lt. Masters. That's classified."

"Come on, sir," she continued. "It's not like you're going to let us talk about this anyways." Her CO did not look pleased. It was a toss up for a second whether Robins was going to go for it or whether he was going to give her some unpleasant duty as a disciplinary action. Fortunately for Sam, he went for it.

"All right, fine. We don't know what it was doing, but we're concerned. We expected the bugs to occupy Juneau. Instead, it looks like they might just be resting before continuing down the coast. Both Seattle and Vancouver are on alert."

Jack shook his head. "You gotta be kidding me."

Robins nodded. "That's going to mean a lot more patrols and a lot more hours, so be ready for it."

"Does anybody know about this?" asked CC.

"No and that's the way it's going to stay. Lt. Masters is right – none of this happened. Are we clear?"

Cevy and Jack kind of nodded their heads. Sam outright sighed.

"Excuse me? Are we clear?" Robins shouted, getting back to basics. A hearty "yes, sir" popped out of each of them. Robins turned and walked out. "You're dismissed."

They walked out of the debriefing room and Sam wondered how much longer it would be before the bugs came down the coast and she found herself in Juneau all over again.



Flash. Oily black tentacles slithered through the air.

Flash. Milky eyes danced with deadly intent.

Flash. A gnashing serrated beak snapped.

What a day for a storm.

Seth didn't wait for the next lightning strike. The blades in his arms popped out and he skewered one of the thing's tentacles and stabbed it in the chest. It screeched and spit green blood at him, and then lashed out with whatever still worked – which threw it off balance. Seth blocked, stuck one blade into its head and cut what passed as its throat with the other. The thing gurgled, convulsed, and died.

It had already shifted back to Human by the time Seth stepped over it. That's something he wouldn't be doing tonight. The bugs had reduced Juneau to ruins and now the Chrysalis Corporation had its elite here too. This was about as dangerous a place as there was on Earth. It would be hard for mortals to survive, but fortunately Seth wasn't quite mortal.

He was looking for survivors. Seth had been here for two hours and he'd already been attacked three times. And all he was finding were corpses. This was the kind of bad that he pictured when he pictured a nuclear bomb. But if anyone was still alive, it would be the Tagers. Seth hoped the others had better luck.

The rendezvous was in ten minutes, but he could already feel the others approaching. "Anyone find anything?" thought out Seth.

"Lots of dead things," replied Orchid. Katie was always a little morbid. Seth knew she was just down the street, but he still couldn't see her.

"I haven't felt anything." Vertigo flew low a few blocks ahead. "And I've covered some ground." If anybody was going to find anything, it was Annody.

Suicide was the last to weigh in. "Bone, this is bad."

"I know," Seth replied. If it was creeping both he and Dikava out, it was getting time to leave. "We're missing someone."

"I'm sure he'll be fine," answered Orchid. Suicide jumped up on the building next to Bone. The two Phantoms leaped from rooftop to rooftop, doing their best to keep low. They had to watch out for Dragonflies – if one of the Migou found them, they'd be done. "Vertigo, why don't you lead the way?"

"Sure," she replied. The Whisper took off on her buzzing wings.

"Orchid, stick close," said Bone.

"I am."

He turned and sure enough, he could see the outline of the Shadow if he looked very hard. Orchid was about twenty feet behind them. They jumped across rooftops and crawled through ruins like alien spiders following the lead of their airborne companion.

Suddenly, Vertigo dropped out of the sky.

"What?" snapped Bone.

She pointed ahead of them. Now that they had stopped they could hear it. People screaming. Alien machines. That low buzz that meant Migou were near. Vertigo just kept backing up – it was weird to see a monster pull back in fear. Orchid took the cue to sneak ahead, invisible and silent – just some of the magic of Tagers.

She got to the edge of the third building in front of them and stopped to take it all in. Bone waited a moment, but was seriously impatient. "What is it?"

"This you have to see for yourself."

"We don't have time for this."

"I'm serious."

That wasn't typical Orchid, so Bone crept up behind her. Suicide wasn't far behind. What waited for them was one of those things that no one really can be – or should be – prepared for. In the ruins below, the Migou herded people, Humans and Nazzadi alike. Usually, the bugs separated the black-skinned race from the natives, but this time they weren't discriminating.

Mecha guarded the area, while Migou battletroops gunned down crowds of civilians. The snaps of rail-guns echoed off whatever still stood, drowning out the whimpers and the cries. When the prisoners went down, the bugs flew over the bodies and blew the heads off of any survivors. Utility machines pushed the bodies into a mass grave and another wave was brought in. And then the scene repeated itself.

They recoiled in horror. "We really need to get out of here," whispered Bone. "Find a way, Vertigo."

The Whisper pushed off in a different direction. The others slowly and quietly followed.



It all happened so fast. They'd narrowly avoided a couple Migou patrols. The regular combat mecha were easy to hide from, but only the Whisper could see Dragonflies if they didn't want to be seen – kind of like Orchid. They'd covered a lot of ground and then they started to come across survivors. One at a time, they'd collected six people and were herding and carrying them through the city.

It was no surprise that Vertigo was the one to think of it. "Has anyone checked them out yet?"

They were so surprised to find survivors that they hadn't. They'd already covered like three miles. Bone got that creeping feeling. "No."

"Why don't I give it a shot?" The Whisper hovered a little lower and watched as help our survivors up and over a pretty tricky crash. Fires were still burning nearby. Bone and Suicide grabbed them one by one and jumped over and through.

"Uh, Bone?"

He was just about to leap off with a young Nazzadi woman in his arms. "What?"

"The one you're holding?"

"Yes."

"She's a Dhohanoi d."

It was a good thing no one could hear them. Bone chucked her. Bolts of arcane electricity shot from between his eyes, frying the now monstrous flesh of a Dua-Sanaras.

Suicide leaped over rubble. "I think they all are."

Sure enough, the survivors weren't looking so mortal anymore. A serpentine Gelgore slithered up a steel support, spitting venomous needles all the way. The Phantoms hit cover. An Elib, all mouth, hopped through the rubble, followed by another two squiddy Dua-Sans. Somewhere close, a gurgling roar erupted and did not go unrecognized. The Zabuth made Bone worry – those things made great white sharks look like candyasses. The Tagers weren't getting out of this unscathed.

They were outnumbered, but not necessarily outgunned. Vertigo mentally shouted, "Incoming!" The Phantoms turned away as gossamer balls of energy fell from the sky, pulsing blinding light. An angry bark from the Elib let them know the creatures were off guard.

Suicide took the stance and Seth hit dirt. A enormous mass of sharp tentacles burst from his chest, catching the Elib and one of his friends. They whipped around for a few seconds, flaying skin and flesh, before finding purchase on the smooth skin of the toothy one. It shrieked and fought, tearing at the things all around it, while Suicide leaned back like a fisherman reeling in his catch. The mass subsumed the creature and impossibly dragged it back into the Phantoms torso, consuming it alive.

This didn't slow down the rest. The Gelgore spat needles at machin-gun speeds, forcing Vertigo to concentrate on not going down. The Dua-Sans undulated down on the Phantoms. The Zabuth waded through rocks that weighed more than cars, pushing them aside with little effort. Seth could see the energy crackling around its unblinking cyclopien eye. Orchid was somewhere.

Tentacles, blades, venomous needles, and energy blasts. Feints, ducks, dodges, and weaves. Vertigo had managed to tangle up the Gelgore, which didn't necessarily make it any less deadly. Bone and Suicide had managed to down one of the Dua-Sans right away, but the Zabuth was trying to rip them apart and wasn't entirely failing. Bone had a big chunk taken out of his side. The wound was closing fast, but it didn't hurt any less. Suicide had been knocked on his ass and was now trying to get out of from under a smothering heap of Dua-San.

"Get down."

Bone more or less stumbled, which did the trick. From out of nowhere, Orchid did her thing. It was always hard to tell, but it looked like she ripped the thing apart from six different places at once. She was high, she was low, she was all around, and the Zabuth wasn't quite prepared for it. It slumped to the ground without so much as a sigh. "I'm done."

The battle was manageable from there, but Orchid was right. Two of them had expended their most powerful offensive abilities for a while. If the Tagers were lucky, this would be it and they'd be on their way. It didn't seem likely, though.



After that they had an agreement. No matter what, take the time to check everyone out. No more surprises. Or at least, so Bone thought.

Two hours later, they were still in Juneau. The going was slow even when the goers were supernatural symbionts. Vertigo kept finding small pockets of survivors. The ones that weren't Dhohanooids were already being herded by the Migou. But most of them were the Chrysalis Corporation's favorite sons and daughters.

"What the hell are so many of them doing here?" asked Vertigo.

Suicide had been displaying uncharacteristic caution. "Probably hunting the surviving Tagers."

"No," Bone replied. "This is more than that. If they're sniffing around a war zone that's still hot, something big's going down."

"Should we find out what it is?"

"No way. We'll be lucky to get out of this alive as is. If we find it on our way out..."

Vertigo busted in. "Shh! Listen!" Migou battletroops.

"Where are they?"

The Whisper was off getting a better look. "Looks like they're systematically covering ground now. They must've solidified their control of the city." She continued to scout.

"What's our best route?"

Vertigo landed, the clutching arms on her chest twitching nervously. "We don't have one. Get into



the buildings and hide in the ruins. It's our only option."

Progress slowed to a crawl, they hid and quietly slid through the buildings as the bugs searched for anything still living.



A few more hours of painfully slow progress was starkly contrasted by twenty minutes of flight. A Migou detachment had gotten wind of them and they'd been ducking rail-gun slugs ever since.

"We're not gonna outrun them," shouted Orchid.

"If we lure them into one of these buildings, we can take them."

Bone shot a look back over his shoulder as a couple slugs whizzed by his head. "How many have we picked up?"

"There's at least a dozen. All armed with assault rifles." Vertigo was about as high up as she could get.

"Hell, I'll play those odds at this point," said Suicide.

Bone wasn't going for it, but then he felt it. With all the chaos, he hadn't even noticed. Someone had been missing, but that someone was about to catch up. "Let's do it. Take the big one up ahead on the right."

It must've been a school at one point, with lots of long hallways and rooms and lockers, but now it was a disaster area just like everything else. The Tagers stuck close together, drifting as best they could from shadow to shadow. Let the Migou commit and then pick them off a few at a time. It was a good plan as long as reinforcements didn't show up.

The Phantoms drew first blood. A couple scouts got too eager and too far ahead. Assault rifles don't work so

well up close. Another four bugs had split off to start at the top. They managed to squeeze off a few rounds, but got torn up fast. It was turning out that the Migou made a bad move following them in there. That is, at least until the reinforcements arrived.

The Tagers didn't know how many, but at least another dozen Migou swarmed onto and into the building. The bugs stopped looking and started firing. Slugs zipped everywhere, chewing up walls. They were either trying to flush them out or knock them off and they didn't seem to care which. "We're leaving! Orchid, find a way!" shouted Bone.

No sooner had Orchid moved than a burst ripped through the floor. It blew right between Bone and Suicide and tore through Vertigo. Blood sprayed – she took it across the right side. One of her wings had been sheared off, another mangled, and her arm hung useless. The Whisper fell to the ground with a thud. Bone bee-lined to her limp form. "Vertigo! Annody!"

She turned her head weakly. "Still alive." Her wings were already starting to regenerate. Vertigo would be back in business in a few minutes. "That was close."

"So am I," came a voice. An explosion rocked the building. They could feel it sag as a couple support beams finally gave.

"Nice of you to join us," said Bone.

"Nice of them to line up straight."

"How's it looking down there?"

"Like I'm gonna get my hands dirty."

The Nightmare had shown up at the perfect time. "Everyone rendezvous with Overkill. This party's done and it's time to go home." They weren't out of it yet, but at least it finally looked like they might make it out alive. This time.

